Great Events from History: The Seventeenth Century 1601-1700

**Salem Witchcraft Trials**

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**Categories** Laws, acts, and legal history; religion and theology; social issues and reform

**Locale** Salem, Massachusetts

**Date** June 2, 1692-May, 1693

*Growing hysteria over the possibility of witches living among them led Massachusetts colonists to try, convict, and execute a number of people, now believed to have been innocent, for the capital crime of witchcraft.*

**Summary of Event**

Early in 1692, a circle of young girls began to meet in the home of Samuel Parris, the Puritan pastor of Salem Village. The minister’s nine-year-old daughter, Betty, and Betty’s eleven-year-old cousin, Abigail Williams, were fascinated by the voodoo-like tales and tricks of the family’s Barbados slave, Tituba , and soon they began to invite their friends to share in the entertainment. Before long, some of the girls in the circle began to behave strangely, complaining of physical maladies, reporting visions, lapsing into trances, and trembling and babbling without restraint.

Among the Puritans , inexplicable afflictions were customarily attributed to the work of the devil, so most of the inhabitants of Salem Village believed the young girls when they charged that Tituba and two village women of doubtful respectability were practicing witchcraft upon them. Two assistants of the Massachusetts General Court, John Hathorne and Jonathan Corwin, were called upon to conduct a legal examination of the accused women. Placing no store in lawyers, the Puritans were governed essentially by Old Testament law. When they found a statement in the Scriptures that witches must not be allowed to live, their duty became clear. The two magistrates conducted their examination more like prosecuting attorneys than impartial investigators. They accepted the dreams and fancies of the young girls as positive evidence and concluded that a “strange tit or wart” on the body of one of the women was a “witches’ tit,” at which the devil and his familiars, or messengers, sucked the blood of the witch.

A woman condemned for witchcraft is burned at the stake.

(Gay Brothers)



As in any system of law, the identity of the accused was essential to the Salem proceedings. One method of identification was a search of the accused’s body for physical signs left behind by the devil. These bodily searches were performed on the woman accused by matrons and midwives, by order of the sheriff. The first six women to be identified as witches through this method were executed. Ironically, women who had knowledge of medicine and who used astrology (an acceptable form of prediction in certain cultures) to forecast illness were historically the victims of accusation themselves. As early as 1441, the duchess of Gloucester had been accused of witchcraft for her “uncanny knowledge of medicine and astrology.”

Parris had planned to implicate Tituba as a witch and force her into naming others. When Tituba confessed her own connection with the devil, she implicated the other accused witches, and on March 7, all three were sent to prison. Tituba later said that Parris beat her into a confession, claiming that her accusations of Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne, as well as two other women, were the result of his abuse.

Although many of the villagers were skeptical of the claims of the girls, the examiners, supported by Parris and Nicholas Noyes, his colleague in Salem Town, called upon other ministers of the area to consult with them. More accusations—this time against respectable, pious women of the community—came almost immediately, and it seemed that the devil was carrying out his deception by possessing seemingly innocent persons. The panic soon enveloped not only the residents of Salem but also those of neighboring towns. The trials would begin in Salem Village, but most of the accused resided in Andover.

Warrants for three Salem Village women were issued on February 29, 1692. The timing of the accusations had greatly increased their impact upon the populace, as the Massachusetts Bay Colony was still quite agitated over the loss of its charter in 1684 and the overthrow of the Dominion of New England in 1689. The weak provisional government, headed by the ailing governor Simon Bradstreet, was merely awaiting the arrival of a new governor and did nothing to avert the crisis. When Sir William Phips, royal governor of Massachusetts, arrived in May, 1692, with the new Massachusetts charter, he decided immediately that proper courts must be established for the trying of witches. On the last Wednesday in May, the Governor’s Council set up a general court, which promptly appointed seven judges to constitute a special Court of Oyer and Terminer to convene on June 2.

The witchcraft fever continued to spread, but the accused were confident that the distinguished judges Bartholomew Gedney, Samuel Sewall, John Richards, William Sergeant, Wait Winthrop, Nathaniel Saltonstall(later replaced by Jonathan Corwin), and Presiding Justice William Stoughton represented some of the best minds in the colony and would deal justly with the witchcraft problem. The court, however, accepted the testimony gathered at the examination as proven fact. At the trials, the judges simply heard new evidence, and a jury decided the prisoners’ fate. On June 8, the General Court revived an old law making witchcraft a capital offense. Two days later, Bridget Bishop, the first condemned witch, went to the gallows.

A schism among the judges over the validity of spectral evidence necessitated a delay in the proceedings while they sought the advice of clergy of the Boston area. Although the ministers urged caution in the handling of spectral evidence, they praised the judges and encouraged further prosecution of the witches. As the summer brought more hangings, the remaining prisoners began to fear for their lives and several managed to escape. The judges, as good Puritans, accepted confession as evidence of possible regeneration and were merciful to those who would confess their dealings with the devil and repent, but few of the accused, as staunch Puritans, were willing to lie, even to save their lives.

On July 15, Martha Carrier, a resident of Andover, was arrested after being accused by several of the afflicted girls from Salem. Carrier’s courage and defiance during her legal examination may have been considered malicious and imprudent by the seventeenth century audience. Testimony by her neighbors may suggest why she first came under suspicion: “. . . and there happening some difference betwixt us she gave forth several threatening words, as she often used to do,” testified one male neighbor. According to religious faith during this time, such threats were considered a curse. The Court of Oyer and Terminer condemned Carrier on August 5, 1692. Five days later, her children—Thomas Jr., ten years of age, and Sarah, age seven—were imprisoned and tricked by magistrate Hathorne into naming their mother. The court further abused all four of her children in hopes that she would confess, but she never did. On August 19, 1692, Martha Carrier was hanged at Salem.

By the time the last of the twenty convicted witches had been executed on September 22, public support for the trials was waning. There were numerous reasons for this change: Several of those who were executed in August died calmly, forgiving their accusers and judges and protesting their innocence to the end; the court’s procedures seemed to be aggravating the witchcraft problem rather than alleviating it; and as the witch hunt spread, persons were being accused who no one could believe were guilty. The panic had been confined almost exclusively to Essex County, and ministers from outside the immediate area began taking a stand against continuing the trials. Increase Mather, the great Boston divine, warned against reliance on spectral evidence and traveled to Salem to investigate the method of obtaining confessions. A petition from Andover was the first of many to call for release of the remaining prisoners and to denounce the accusing girls. On October 29, Governor Phips dismissed the Court of Oyer and Terminer. Its end marked the end of the witch hunt.

While some people were disappointed to see the trials end, most were relieved to return to their long-neglected work. Blaming Parris for allowing the death of innocent relatives and friends, the congregation of the Salem church voted to void his salary. In the ensuing years, many of the accusers of the condemned repented, and in 1709 and 1711, the Massachusetts General Court restored to many of those who had been accused of being witches, as well as the children of the executed victims, their good names. Those families were awarded compensation for financial losses. The names of some, however, were never cleared.

During the Salem witchcraft trials, both Increase and Cotton Mather expressed their doubts about the proceedings, especially concerning the use of spectral evidence. Increase Mather insisted that the special Court of Oyer and Terminer be terminated because it might be guilty of shedding innocent blood. Cotton Mather, one of the most cogent critics of the court’s methods while it was sitting, afterward offered a strongly partisan defense of the judges. Because of this defense, historians have incorrectly presented Cotton Mather as the instigator of the witchcraft trials. He was, in fact, guilty of not opposing the trials vigorously enough. Although the Salem trials were not the last, because of the Massachusetts authorities’ actions in discovering, acknowledging, and disowning their errors, the Salem experience helped to end witchcraft trials in Western civilization.

**Significance**

The tragedy of Salem extended beyond the people who were executed. Added to the list of victims should be Sarah Good’s nursing infant, who died while Good was incarcerated; Roger Toothaker, who was murdered in prison; Lydia Dustin, who was found innocent but never released and died in prison in 1693; and many others, including slaves who suffered not only from bondage but also from witchcraft accusations. By acts of the General Court of November 23 and December 16, special sessions of the Superior Court of Judicature were ordered to complete the trials. The new circuit court was composed largely of the same judges as the recently dissolved court, but it now held spectral evidence to be inadmissible. Fifty-two accused witches came to trial early in January, 1693, and forty-nine were released immediately for lack of evidence. The governor soon reprieved the others, and by May, all the remaining prisoners had been discharged.

A number of reasons have been offered to explain this tragic period in colonial history: Generational, racial, and sexual hostility, opposition to law, social stresses, and food poisoning all have been advanced as the causes of anxiety and hysteria in Salem during this time. However, the causes were complex and no single explanation is sufficient in itself. Whatever their causes, the Salem witchcraft trials have taken on an iconic role in American history, and an unjust search for scapegoats is now commonly referred to as a “witch hunt.” Indeed, when Senator Joseph McCarthy conducted his search for Communists in the United States government and in Hollywood in the 1950’, playwright Arthur Miller responded by writing *The Crucible* (pr., pb. 1953), a play about the Salem witchcraft trials.

**Further Reading**

**1**

Fox, Sanford J. *Science and Justice: The Massachusetts Witchcraft Trials*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968. Describes the role of science in prosecuting the accused witches. Examines the scientific awareness, attitudes, and ethos at the time of the trials.

**2**

Goodbeer, Richard. *The Devil’s Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Examines the inconsistencies of folk magic as practiced by ordinary men and women in early New England. Focuses on the similarities between Puritanism and magic that enabled even church members to switch from one to the other without questioning their actions. Chapter 5 is devoted to the witch hunt of 1692.

**3**

Hill, Frances. *A Delusion of Satan: The Full Story of the Salem Witch Trials*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1995. Well-written and well-researched popular account of the trials, examining them within the social, religious, economic, and political climate of seventeenth century Massachusetts.

**4**

Hoffer, Peter Charles. *The Salem Witchcraft Trials: A Legal History*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997. Recounts the events of the trials, describing how the desolation of New England life—Indian wars, disease, severe weather, and challenges to Puritan power—created an atmosphere of paranoia that spurred the persecution of alleged witches.

**5**

Norton, Mary Beth. *In the Devil’s Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002. Norton contends the witchcraft trials must be understood in relation to the Second Indian War (King William’s War), because colonists’ religious interpretation of the war created an environment in which the trials could take place.

**6**

Robinson, Enders A. *The Devil Discovered: Salem Witchcraft, 1692*. New York: Hippocrene Books, 1991. Begins with a chronological sequence of events and concludes by analyzing the lives of the first seventy-five accused witches. Tables, illustrations, and maps clarify the intricate relationships of the accusers and accused.

**7**

Rosenthal, Bernard. *Salem Story: Reading the Witch Trials of 1692*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Investigates the assumptions surrounding the trials, the mythologizing of the event, and the stereotyping of witches regarding gender and age. Uses surviving documentation to illustrate that many of the accusers used logic and reason, rather than hysteria, to charge their victims.

**8**

Weisman, Richard. *Witchcraft, Magic, and Religion in Seventeenth Century Massachusetts*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984. Contends that the cultural response to the witch hunts of 1692 was aided, in part, by a lack of consensus over how to define and deal with witchcraft. Addresses political and legislative issues.

(MLA Style)

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